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ABSTRACT

As part of an effort to discover what was being done with comprehension instruction in classrooms, basal reader manuals, and reading methodology textbooks, an analysis was made of the content of eight reading methods textbooks that had copyright dates at least as recent as 1983 and that were the most frequently used texts. All the pages in the eight books were read independently and word by word by two researchers who met regularly to discuss the part of a textbook that both had recently read. Each researcher noted segments of a text that even came close to being a specific suggestion for teaching comprehension. The findings were similar to findings from prior studies of classrooms and basal manuals in the sense that specific descriptions of comprehension teaching were either scarce or totally missing. (HOD)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Reading Education Report No. 59

READING METHODOLOGY TEXTBOOKS:
ARE THEY HELPING TEACHERS TEACH COMPREHENSION?

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Reading Methodology Textbooks

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Abstract

The report describes the last in a series of three studies whose purpose is to learn what is done with comprehension instruction in three settings: classrooms, basal reader manuals, and reading methodology textbooks. To find out whether authors of the methods books treat comprehension instruction with sufficient frequency and specificity as to be helpful to both teachers and prospective teachers, eight textbooks were read. The eight, all with 1983 or 1984 copyright dates, included the best sellers on the assumption that they are likely to be the most influential. Findings were similar to what was reported for the prior studies of classrooms and basal manuals in the sense that specific descriptions of comprehension instruction were either scarce or totally missing. A second similar finding was confusion between comprehension instruction and comprehension assessment. Possible reasons for what was (and was not) found in the examined materials are cited.

Reading Methodology Textbooks:

Are They Helping Teachers Teach Comprehension?

I know that I don't do enough with comprehension instruction. Since suggestions for teaching comprehension in my basal reader manual are both scarce and brief, is there something I can read that will help me offer more and better comprehension instruction?

There is no doubt but that the request just quoted exemplifies the most common question asked of me at conferences and in letters. While it seems logical to assume that one source of precise guidance for teaching comprehension is textbooks on reading methodology, findings in the study to be reported here hardly support that assumption.

Before the results of a thorough analysis of eight recent elementary methods textbooks are described, data from two earlier studies of classrooms and teaching manuals will be reviewed, as they explain why requests from teachers like the one quoted above are common. Since comprehension instruction was also the focus of these two studies, it might be helpful--perhaps even necessary--to explain how that instruction is defined. Because of what was found in the methods textbooks, it is also necessary to make distinctions among the responsibilities of teachers insofar as comprehension is concerned. The diagram in Figure 1 provides a setting for the explanation of distinctions that

follows, which only highlights what is relevant for the report of the methods textbook study.

 Insert Figure 1 about here.

Comprehension: Teachers' Responsibilities

As Figure 1 shows, teachers' responsibilities have been divided into three categories. The one called "facilitating comprehension" includes activating, or adding to, what children know about the world that is relevant for comprehending a given selection. The significance of background information for comprehending has received widespread attention in recent years in the framework of schema theory.

A second responsibility of teachers, assessing or testing comprehension, is directed toward finding out what was comprehended. The means used to determine what children acquired from reading a selection varies but, in classrooms, often takes the form of asking questions.

Whereas testing comprehension is concerned with the product of reading, it is the process of reading that is the concern of comprehension instruction. The difference means that while the aim of teaching comprehension is to have a positive effect on children's mental activities as they work their way through a piece of text, the aim of testing comprehension is to make a judgment about the outcome of those activities.

As is true for any instruction, procedures for teaching children how to comprehend vary in relation to specific objectives. When comprehension instruction is viewed globally, the usual means for accomplishing goals is some combination of imparting information, giving explanations, citing examples and nonexamples, modeling, and asking questions.

Topics for comprehension instruction are numerous. At the beginning, the significance of typographic features of text (e.g., commas, periods, capitalization, indentation) often requires attention, as do pronoun and adverb referents. Later, signal words for cause-effect relationships and sequence, and for statements of fact, opinion, and probability are other suitable topics. More sophisticated uses of anaphora along with various kinds of cohesive ties provide still further subject matter for instruction.

Although comprehension instruction--as the examples just cited indicate--is viewed as being text-based, the significance of world knowledge for comprehending is not minimized as a result. Instruction about inferences, for example, would start with a given piece of text, but that hardly eliminates knowledge-based inferences from consideration. To be more specific, using a sentence like Of the three girls, only Kelli could reach the shelf where their mother kept the cookies, a teacher would show children exactly how the text allows readers to infer that (1) the girls are sisters, (2) Kelli is the tallest, and (3) the

cookies are probably on a high shelf. In the same lesson, the children would be reminded that a conclusion about the cookies being in some kind of a container is based not on the text but on what they know about where cookies are kept. They would further be reminded that hunches about why the cookies were on a high shelf derive, in this instance, from what they know about mothers, children, and cookies.

Instruction that focuses directly on the function of world knowledge in comprehending demonstrates even more explicitly that a text-based conception of comprehension instruction is not as circumscribed as it may at first appear to be. Let's use the following text to underscore this point: Art gets all A's. He studies hard. Sentences like these can provide a focus for instruction whose objective is to help students understand that what they know or have experienced should be used to help with comprehending--in the case of the text cited, with comprehending a cause-effect relationship.

Having considered three categories of teacher behavior related to comprehension, let's move now to the studies of classrooms and basal reader manuals that will be briefly reviewed as a way of providing a framework for reporting the analysis of reading methodology textbooks.

Studies of Classrooms and Basal Manuals

The purpose of the study of classrooms (Durkin, 1978-79) was to identify the kind and amount of comprehension instruction that

is offered in grades 3-6. To achieve that end, each of 39 teachers in 14 school systems was observed on three successive days when they were teaching reading and social studies. The amount of time spent in the classrooms was 17,998 minutes, of which only 45 minutes (less than 1%) was spent on teaching comprehension. Since the 45 minutes included 12 separate instances of instruction--all of which occurred during the reading period--the average duration of an episode was brief to say the least. The brevity led to the use of "mentioning" to characterize the instruction, which was defined as "saying just enough about a topic to allow for an assignment related to it."

Assignments and assessment took up much more of the teachers' time than did instruction. Specifically, 15% went to giving assignments while 18% was spent on assessing comprehension, almost always with questions.

Because of the striking similarity in how the 39 teachers spent their time and, second, because each used one or more basal series, the classroom observation study was followed by another in which the manuals (K-VI) of five basal programs were read word for word in order to learn what they suggest for teaching comprehension (Durkin, 1981). A quick way to summarize data from the second study is to say that they corresponded closely to what had been seen in the classrooms. For example, the manuals included very few suggestions for teaching comprehension. In addition, when suggestions were made, they were usually brief.

While teaching comprehension was slighted, recommendations for testing comprehension--mostly with questions--consumed many pages in the manuals. The fact that countless numbers of references were also made to brief written assignments came as no surprise, but what did was the number of times that segments in the manuals were mislabeled. Of direct relevance for the research was the frequency with which procedures for assessing comprehension were called "instruction."

Having found little comprehension instruction either in classrooms or in teaching manuals, it seemed logical to examine reading methodology textbooks next in order to learn whether they provide specific help for teaching comprehension.

Study of Reading Methodology Textbooks

Although it is possible that the majority of elementary teachers will improve and add to what they do to teach comprehension only when basal manuals provide more and better help, the textbooks that preservice and inservice students use in methods courses should not be overlooked as a source of influence on classroom practices. Conceivably, if these textbooks provide an adequate amount of specific guidance for teaching comprehension, they could not only improve classroom instruction but also serve two other functions as well. They could help teachers see the need for better manuals, which, in turn, might encourage them to communicate their dissatisfaction to publishers. Knowing more about comprehension instruction,

teachers might also make better choices when their school systems adopt a new basal program.

For three reasons, then, it seemed important to know what methodology textbooks do with comprehension instruction.

Review of the Literature

The review of the literature that was done to prepare for the study uncovered five content analyses of reading methods textbooks, only one of which focused on comprehension instruction (Heffernan, 1980; Hoffman, Daniels, & Kearney, 1983; Sadker, Sadker, & Garies, 1980; Sadow, 1984; and Shannon, 1983). The one concerned with comprehension was reported by Sadow (after this writer's study was completed) in a paper entitled "Comprehension Instruction--The View From Reading Methods Textbooks." For her analysis, Sadow selected four elementary textbooks, "which were among the top five in a list of texts frequently used in reading methods courses according to an informal survey conducted by a textbook publisher" (p. 2). In each case, the chapter(s) on comprehension was read to see what specific suggestions were made for teaching comprehension in an explicit way. Sadow assumed that such suggestions would focus on: (a) reader strategies such as predicting, self-questioning, making inferences, using background knowledge, and reasoning; and (b) text characteristics such as structure, punctuation, signal words, main ideas, story grammar, and paragraph organization.

Sadow adds:

They (the specific suggestions) had to describe the sort of information that should be presented to students, how it should be presented (chalkboard demonstration, thinking aloud explanation), or how a teacher should interact with students . . ." (p. 3).

Given the criteria noted above, the examples cited by Sadow as illustrating specific suggestions for teaching comprehension are unexpectedly general. For "Reader Strategies," for instance, the following is cited as an example: "Teachers can remind students to concentrate on meaning . . . by asking such questions as, 'What is the author telling you?'" For the category "Text Characteristics," the following is called a specific suggestion: "When a student misinterprets or miscomprehends . . . we need to go back to the passage and discover . . . the pieces of the puzzle that he does not understand."

In spite of Sadow's liberal interpretation of "specific," her findings are hardly encouraging for any who view the content of methods books as a potential means for improving, and adding to, the comprehension instruction that is now provided in elementary schools. Responding to the meager help found in the textbook chapters dealing with comprehension, Sadow writes:

The results of this investigation should not be taken as criticism of the textbooks examined. A great deal has been learned about the reading process in recent years. . . . Therefore, in all fairness, it is probably premature to expect explicit instruction to be emphasized in current reading methods texts (pp. 5-6).

The Present Study

One assumption of the study undertaken by this writer is that authors of reading methods textbooks with copyright dates of 1983 or later had ample opportunity (1) to know about current comprehension research, and (2) to disseminate what was learned from the studies in the form of specific suggestions for teaching comprehension. Consequently, one initial decision was to examine books that, first, had a copyright date at least as recent as 1983 and, second, were the most frequently used texts. The second criterion was chosen because the best-selling textbooks have the greatest chance of being the most influential. The three publishers contacted about frequency of use each said that factual information was unavailable but that they were willing to name titles that were among the most popular. Based on their nominations, four books were chosen as they appeared on the three lists.¹ All were at least in a Second Edition; three of the four were in Sadow's study.

On the assumption that it might be easier to include implications of the new comprehension research for instruction in the first edition of a book, three new texts were also selected. Another book that became available when the investigation was just getting underway and that dealt exclusively with comprehension was included, too. Thus eight textbooks, all published in the U.S., were analyzed.

Method of Analysis

As was true of the earlier study of basal manuals (Durkin, 1981), all the pages in the eight books were read independently, and word by word, by the present author and a research assistant, who met regularly to discuss the part of a textbook that both had recently read. Since the guideline used for the reading was to note any segment of a text that even came close to being a specific suggestion for teaching comprehension, the discussions were lengthy. Since only a part of each book was read prior to meeting, the discussions were also numerous. Because of the nature of the content of all the examined textbooks, practically no disagreement occurred about what was to be catalogued as specific help. On the very few occasions when disagreement did exist, the text was given the benefit of the doubt and the segment was counted as an example. If anything, then, the data to be reported exaggerate the amount of specific help offered in the eight textbooks for teaching comprehension.

Findings: Comprehension Instruction

Results of the analyses are summarized in Table 1. Since as many as 10 specific suggestions for teaching comprehension may sound impressive, the first four that were in what is referred to in the table as Textbook No. 1 are listed below. They are typical of the suggestions found in all the textbooks in their brevity and meager specificity.

Insert Table 1 about here.

"To introduce breaking down complex sentences into main ideas in order to discover the information included" write a sentence on the board, then list the main points. (Sentence and three points are listed.) Then says that children could combine three different sentences into one, but no examples are given. (12 lines of text)

Suggests having children change sentences written in active voice to sentences in passive voice in order to show that the two have the same meaning. Offers one example that the teacher is to do for students. One more active voice sentence is given (Terry hit Chris) along with the suggestion, "Tell them (children) to write a sentence that says the same thing but begins with Chris." (7 lines of text)

Lists two groups of sentences; in each, words are the same but punctuation is different. Says, "Discuss the differences in meaning among each set of sentences highlighting the function of each punctuation mark."
[10 lines, 6 for the illustrative sentences]

Under the topic "Listening-Reading Transfer Lesson" suggests reading something to children (no examples given) "to respond to a purpose" (e.g., determining sequence of events). "As the class discusses the detected sequence, the teacher provides guidance, helps children explain how they made their decisions, and rereads the material if it is necessary to resolve controversies." Suggests reading another selection for the same purpose, again to be followed by a discussion. Adds: "Teachers can use this type of lesson with any comprehension skill." [9 lines of text]

While it is impossible to answer the question, "How many specific examples of comprehension instruction should be in reading methods books?" it seems indisputable to maintain that the examples that are included should be more detailed and comprehensive than any found in the examined books, especially when it is kept in mind that the Preface in each states that it is suitable for undergraduate courses.

Findings: Comprehension Assessment

The fact that considerable attention in each of the eight books went to procedures for assessing comprehension was hardly surprising, as that has always been a popular topic. What was completely unexpected, however, was the frequency with which assessment procedures were referred to as instruction. (You will recall that the study of basal manuals referred to earlier uncovered the same kind of mislabeling.) In one book, as many as 16 erroneous descriptions were found. The average number in all eight textbooks was 10. [Numbers are based on topics (e.g., signal words for opinion), not on the number of separate activities suggested for a topic. In addition, to be counted as a misnamed suggestion, an author had to refer to the assessment with words like "instruction," "teaching," or "lesson." Were these guidelines not adhered to, the number of suggestions for assessment that were called instruction would be enlarged considerably.]

Two examples of assessment that were said by authors to be instruction follow:

"Teachers can use the following exercises (5 are described) to teach figurative language." One exercise is: "Give each child a copy of a poem that is filled with figures of speech and have the class compete to see who can 'dig up' all the figures of speech first. You may require students to label all figures of speech

properly as to type or to explain them." (Preceding these "teaching exercises" is a list of "five common kinds of figures of speech that cause trouble," each of which is briefly defined.)

Under the heading "Teaching Strategies for Comprehending Anaphoric Relationships," the following appears: ". . . take a selection with which pupils are familiar and ask them to identify all words that substitute for other words. Once the replacement words have been identified, pupils should name the antecedents of each. The relations identified can then be classified by pupils into such categories as pronouns, pro-verbs, pro-sentences, and superordinate terms." (Prior to this, the four categories referred to are defined and illustrated. How to teach the categories is not covered.)

Additional Findings

While only the authors themselves can explain why they covered comprehension in the way that they did, readers of their textbooks are likely to agree on two points. The first is that many pages in these books are consumed by descriptions of theories and studies of comprehension. In two of the textbooks in particular, the descriptions are so technical and detailed

that comprehending them required (on my part at least) slow, careful reading--on certain occasions, even some re-reading. While the amount of attention that ought to go to research in methods textbooks said to be suitable for undergraduates is debatable, the contention that what is done with research should be readily comprehensible is not.

The second conclusion that any reader of these eight textbooks is likely to reach is that even though the authors say that they subscribe to a view of comprehending that sees it as an interactive process in which the text and the reader's knowledge of the world are equally important, their books--six of them in particular--clearly assign primary importance to what is in the reader's head. Or, to put it differently, schema theory has taken over insofar as six of the examined textbooks are concerned. One of the authors states, for example, that "Prereading activities are considered to be at the 'heart' of teaching comprehension." This is followed by a detailed description of the importance of assessing and activating readers' prior knowledge and of building necessary background information.

In yet another of the books, a very brief discussion of "guide words for time" (e.g., after, before, until) is followed by the statement: "I want to reiterate that the teaching of guide words is not the answer to the problem of comprehending relationships among ideas in sentences." This author goes on to

say that comprehending "rests more on having appropriate schemata for the content of the material than upon one's ability to interpret surface clues."

Actually, much that was said in the books about developing comprehension abilities could not help but bring to mind an observation made by Carl Bereiter in a paper presented at the annual AERA meeting in 1978. At that time he cautioned that a "primitive interpretation" of schema theory could lead to the conclusion that "the way to improve reading comprehension is to stuff children's heads with 'subject matter' so that, whatever they read, they will stand a chance of already knowing quite a bit about it" (Bereiter, 1978, p. 7). Based on the methods textbooks examined, Bereiter was indeed clairvoyant.

In Conclusion

Findings from the analysis of textbooks prompt three reactions, the first of which can be expressed with the question, "Will we educators never be able to achieve balance in the positions we take?" While it is unquestionably clear that a reader's knowledge of the world is extremely important for comprehending, that importance should hardly prompt anyone to act as if text does not matter or to ignore the sizeable number of children who have trouble comprehending even when they know a great deal about the content or topic that a piece of text covers.

The second reaction is puzzlement over the widespread confusion between teaching and testing comprehension. One undesirable consequence of the persistent failure to make a distinction is that children are often tested on what was never taught.

The third reaction is the recognition that little exists right now that is helpful to those teachers who want very much to do a better job of providing direct, explicit instruction in the process of comprehending. What the study of textbooks points to is the need for instructors of reading methods courses to complement the textbooks they use with specific descriptions of comprehension instruction. Meanwhile, we are still waiting for authors of basal manuals to make major changes in what they recommend for such instruction.

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Footnote

¹Although my own textbook Teaching Them to Read (Durkin, 1983) was on the three lists, there was never any intention to use it in the study. Sadow (1984) also eliminated it although it was among the top five from the list of frequently used texts that she had obtained because, she explains, "the author is closely identified with the view of instruction under investigation" (p. 2).

Table 1

Content Analysis of Eight Reading Methodology Textbooks:Comprehension Instruction

Textbook	Copyright Date	Edition	Total Pages	Number of Specific Suggestions for Comprehension Instruction
1	1984	III	514	10
2	1983	II	551	6
3 ^a	1984	I	167	6
4	1984	I	430	5
5	1984	I	344	3
6	1983	II	528	2
7	1983	I	512	1
8	1984	IV	590	0

^aOnly deals with comprehension

Figure 1

Comprehension: Teachers' Responsibilities

